



---

Is the Story of Aḥikar the Wise of Indian Origin?

Author(s): Alexander H. Krappe

Source: *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Dec., 1941, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Dec., 1941), pp. 280-284

Published by: American Oriental Society

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/593910>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

American Oriental Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the American Oriental Society*

form. It certainly is the earliest written version. The reference to Li Mi is perhaps more definite than in the *Sui-shu* where an extra line of what may be only a jingle has been added. In the *Court Journal* version the lines one and two contain in immediate succession the meanings of Li and Mi. The fact of any mention of Li Mi being retained in a song explained only as prophesying the accession of Li Yüan seems significant as evidence of its having been faithfully recorded. And

the use of garden (*yüan*) instead of trees (*mu*) fits better with the explanation in the *Sui-shu* than the version there presented.

Finally, the ballad as quoted by Wen Ta-ya is particularly significant for the history of the times because of its association not only with an early important rebel, Li Mi, but with the successful career of the founder of a new dynasty, the Duke of T'ang.

## IS THE STORY OF AḤIKAR THE WISE OF INDIAN ORIGIN?

ALEXANDER H. KRAPPE

PRINCETON, N. J.

IN THE CITY of Nandpur there once lived a king, called Nanda, with his son, prince Hemmand, and his chancellor, Śakataḷa, renowned for his wisdom. The latter, after years of faithful service, aroused the suspicion of his master, who without inquiry caused him to be thrown into a dungeon, whereupon he appointed a nincompoop his successor. Some five years later the king of Bengal decided to test his royal colleague: he sent him two mares, mother and daughter, but resembling each other perfectly. King Nanda was to determine which was the mother and which the daughter, at the risk of being accounted a dunce. In his perplexity the monarch remembered his former chancellor and inquired after him. Fortunately, Śakataḷa was still alive in his prison. After being restored to his office and informed of the problem, the wise minister subjected the two mares to a simple test, which left no doubt as to which was the mother and which the daughter. Another version adds that, after this, another king, anxious to test the wisdom of Nanda and his councillors, sent him a staff, with the request to tell him which was the root-end and which the top-end. Śakataḷa immersed the staff in water: the end which sank deeper was the root-end.<sup>1</sup>

This amusing tale forms part of the *Suvā-bahuttari-kathā*, the Seventy-two Narratives of a Parrot, a Rājasthāni text derived from the lost Sanskrit poem of Devadatta, which is itself a derivative of the lost *Śukasaptati* of unknown authorship and date but anterior to the end of the twelfth century of the Christian era.<sup>2</sup> The extant *textus simplicior*<sup>2a</sup> of the *Śukasaptati* is another

off-shoot of the same work, so that Devadatta's poem and the *textus simplicior* are parallel versions, derived from a common source.

Even before the twelfth century our story was incorporated into Somadeva's *Ocean of Story*, though in a strangely altered form, no doubt in order to make it fit into the general frame of the compilation. Since Somadeva wrote his huge work at the beginning of the twelfth century of the Christian era, it is clear that our story must have been current in India prior to that date. The Aḥikar story is known to have been composed at Babylon between 650 and 450 before Christ.<sup>3</sup> There is thus an interval of a millennium and a half, roughly speaking, between the probable date of the Semitic branch and the *terminus ante quem* of the Indian branch of the story. Few critics, we believe, will consider an application of the dictum *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* as unfair under these circumstances. Or, to express it more conservatively, very cogent evidence must be adduced to convince us of the priority of the Indian branch.

The problem of the ultimate origin of the Aḥikar story was first posed by Th. Benfey who, as an Indianist, stoutly maintained the hypothesis

<sup>1</sup> J. Hertel, *Indische Märchen*, Jena, 1921, p. 321.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hertel, *Das Pañcatantra, seine Geschichte und seine Verbreitung*, Leipzig-Berlin, 1914, pp. 234 ff.

<sup>2a</sup> Richard Schmidt, *Die Śukasaptati (textus simplicior) aus dem Sanskrit übersetzt*, Kiel, 1894, pp. 68 f.

<sup>3</sup> B. Meissner, *Das Märchen vom weisen Achiqar (Der Alte Orient*, XVI (2), Leipzig, 1917), *passim*; cf. also Th. Nöldeke, "Untersuchungen zum Achiqar-Roman," *Abhandlungen d. Gött. Gesellsch. d. Wissensch., phil.-hist. Kl., N. F.*, XIV (4), Berlin, 1913, p. 6.

of an Indian origin of the romance;<sup>4</sup> but, alas, his reasoning is anything but convincing and has in fact been rejected by many competent scholars.<sup>5</sup>

None the less, Benfey's hypothesis did not die with its originator, but was subsequently revived and defended with new arguments by disciples of Benfey such as Emmanuel Cosquin,<sup>6</sup> Paul Marc,<sup>7</sup> and Th. Zachariae.<sup>8</sup>

In view of the long history of the Ahikar story in the Near East it is easily understood that it must be classed among the so-called "traditional" books to which Gilbert Murray devoted some of his most brilliant and informative pages. It is a book which to all appearances grew from relatively small beginnings—the narrative of the papyrus text of Elephantine,<sup>9</sup> written down prior to 400 B. C., is a simple, short, and straight-forward story—into the bulky romance which we know from the various Eastern redactions, attracting new material, particularly in the purely didactic parts. Since many of these accessory features are manifestly late and alien to the Babylonian original, their Indian provenance, where it can be shown, will prove nothing whatever as to the origin of the romance itself. Since Cosquin's and Zachariae's demonstrations were largely concerned with these secondary features,<sup>10</sup> their studies, though interesting and useful, fail to prove the main point, the Indian origin of the romance proper.

The original Semitic story, of which the papyrus of Elephantine gives a fair idea, runs briefly as follows:<sup>11</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Th. Benfey, *Kleinere Schriften*, Berlin, 1890-92, II, 164 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Th. Zachariae, *Kleine Schriften*, Bonn-Leipzig, 1920, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Revue Biblique internationale*, VIII (1899), pp. 50-82; 510-31; cf. also Th. Reinach, *Revue des études juives*, XXXVIII (1899), pp. 1-13.

<sup>7</sup> *Studien zur vergleichenden Literaturgeschichte*, II (1902), pp. 393-411.

<sup>8</sup> *Zeitschrift des Vereins f. Volkskunde*, XVII (1907), pp. 172-95; *op. cit.*, pp. 72-82.

<sup>9</sup> A. Ungnad, *Aramäische Papyrus aus Elephantine*, Leipzig, 1911, pp. 62 ff.; A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B. C.*, Oxford, 1923, pp. 204 ff.

<sup>10</sup> Such accessory features are: the frequency of the number 8 in some of the late redactions of the Ahikar story, the comparison of the young scapegrace with a cedar (which is ingeniously supposed to have originally been a lotus), Ahikar's childlessness and his invocation of the gods, and, of course, the various riddles.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent bibliography cf. W. Bousset, *Die*

The wise Ahikar, chancellor of a Mesopotamian king, being childless, adopts a nephew named Nadan,<sup>12</sup> who turns out to be an ingrate and hatches a plot by which it is made to appear that Ahikar is intent upon the destruction of his royal master. The latter, like all Oriental kings of story-books very prone to anger, does not trouble himself to investigate the matter but condemns Ahikar to death. Having once shown a favor to the grandee in charge of the execution, Ahikar now reaps the reward of his good deed: a common criminal is dressed up as Ahikar and publicly executed, while the real Ahikar lives concealed in the basement of his palace.<sup>13</sup> Hearing of the wise minister's disappearance, a foreign king sends a sort of ultimatum to Ahikar's master, requiring him to solve certain riddles. As no one at court has enough wit, the king is sorely perplexed and repents him of having destroyed (as he thinks) his faithful Ahikar. Then the latter's friend and protector speaks up; Ahikar is released from his subterranean abode, reinstated in his office of chancellor and entrusted with giving fitting replies to the impudent messengers of the foreign king, while the infamous Nadan meets with the punishment he so justly deserves.

Paul Marc<sup>14</sup> supposed this story, however simple in appearance, to be the result of a fusion of two rudimentary themes, viz. (1) the disgrace and rehabilitation of a minister, and (2) the ungrateful nephew. Now it is quite certain that the first of these two themes does exist by itself, not only in the Indian version outlined at the outset of this study, but in the French romance of *Ogier le Danois*,<sup>15</sup> the Bavarian legend of Hans Dollinger,<sup>16</sup>

*Religion des Judentums im späthellenistischen Zeitalter*, Tübingen, 1926, pp. 7 f.; A. Danon, *Revue d'ethnographie et des traditions populaires*, IV (1923), pp. 47-68 (French translation of a Turkish version); Moses Gaster, *Studies and Texts*, London, 1925-28, I, 239 ff.; the standard edition of the various redactions is still that of F. C. Conybeare, J. Rendel Harris and Agnes Smith Lewis, *The Story of Ahikar*, Cambridge, 1913; cf. also François Nau, *Histoire et Sagesse d'Ahikar l'Assyrien*, Paris, 1909. On the probable historical basis of the story—or part of it—cf. A. T. Olmstead, *JAOS* 56 (1936), p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> In the papyrus text the young scapegrace is the son of Ahikar.

<sup>13</sup> This is a very popular motive and found all over the Orient; cf. Tawney-Penzer, *The Ocean of Story*, London, 1924-28, II, 10 and 123; E. J. W. Gibb, *The History of the Forty Vezirs*, London, 1886, p. 123; W. A. Clouston, *Flowers from a Persian Garden*, London, 1890, p. 169; Wolf Aly, *Volksmärchen, Sage und Novelle bei Herodot und seinen Zeitgenossen*, Göttingen, 1921, p. 87. If Liudprand of Cremona (*Antap.*, I. 9; III. 32) is to be believed, such happenings were not rare in the Byzantine empire of the tenth century.

<sup>14</sup> *Op. et loc. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Carl Voretzsch, *Ueber die Sage von Ogier dem Dänen*, Halle, 1891, pp. 99 ff.; P. Rajna, *Romania*, III (1874),

various South-Slav traditions about Marco Kraljevič,<sup>17</sup> in Russian ballads about Ilia of Murom,<sup>18</sup> and in a number of folk-tales.<sup>19</sup> A similar feature was noted in the legendary history of Belisar,<sup>20</sup> and it is a fact historically well ascertained that the Byzantine general Bardas Phokas had to be recalled from exile to suppress the rebellion of Bardas Skleros.<sup>21</sup> Finally, there is the Irish story of the brave De Coucy, whom the king of England confined in the Tower of London after taking him from his barony in the county of Cork and whom he kept a prisoner till the king of France sent over a champion to insult and beard him. Then the English king was glad to take De Coucy out of the dungeon to fight the French champion, since no one of his own English dared take the Frenchman in hand.<sup>22</sup>

True enough, in many of these texts it is not so much a question of matching wits as of determining who is the best boxer or swordsman; but the essential plot: imprisonment or exile of the pillar of the throne and the ensuing perplexity of the king, his master, is everywhere the same. The theme is however so simple, so elementary—similar situations must have arisen, and doubtless did arise, time and again in the course of history—that there is nothing to prevent us from assuming that stories of this type originated independently in different countries and at different times.

On the other hand, the theme of the ungrateful nephew does not appear to exist separately. In the

Aḥikar story it simply serves as a plausible explanation of the king's sudden anger at his vezir. It could therefore be easily replaced, once a storyteller hit upon a different motivation which for one reason or another appealed to him more. The fact that in the Indian *Śukasaptati* such a substitution has evidently taken place cannot then be used to demonstrate the priority of this version over the Near Eastern ones, the less so because the reason of the change is not difficult to guess: all tales of the *Śukasaptati* are put in the mouth of a learned parrot intent on persuading a *belle volage* to break her tryst with her lover. They had therefore to be short to keep within the bounds of verisimilitude. As a result, a far shorter motivation was substituted for the long-drawn-out intrigue of the infamous Nandan. For the same reason, probably, the picturesque episode of the grateful nobleman who manages to keep alive the victim of His Majesty's wrath, was also suppressed; the Indian reviser hit upon the simple device of having the king condemn his chancellor not to death but to life-imprisonment in a dungeon.

At the same time it is worth underlining that the Indian story is certainly not of independent growth, but a branch of the Aḥikar romance, for two very good reasons, viz. (1) the connection of the main theme with the challenge to a matching of wits of the wise minister's royal master by a foreign king, and (2) the name of the ungrateful monarch, *Nanda*.

Nanda is the name of an historical Indian dynasty, the last ruler of which was a contemporary of Alexander the Great;<sup>22a</sup> he appears to have become a legendary figure and, as often happens, to have attracted to his name many a floating story. There is, however, no conceivable fact in his known biography that would have lent color to the attribution to him of our tale. So the question arises: Why was Nanda rather than any other of the many legendary kings who have ruled in India<sup>23</sup> chosen to take the place of the Semitic monarch of the original Aḥikar story? The answer

pp. 31 ff.; J. Bédier, *Les Légendes épiques*, Paris, 1921, II, 281 ff.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Wehrhan, *Die deutschen Sagen des Mittelalters*, München, 1920, II, 9.

<sup>17</sup> A. Dozon, *L'Épopée serbe*, Paris, 1888, p. 112; W. M. Petrovitch, *Hero Tales and Legends of the Serbians*, London, 1914, p. 109; A. Mazon, *Contes slaves de la Macédoine sud-occidentale*, Paris, 1923, p. 95.

<sup>18</sup> A. Rambaud, *La Russie épique*, Paris, 1876, p. 59; W. Wollner, *Untersuchungen über die Volksepik der Grossrussen*, Leipzig, 1879, p. 39; I. F. Hapgood, *The Epic Songs of Russia*, New York, 1886, p. 270; W. Nehring, *Mitteilungen d. Schlesischen Gesellschaft f. Volkskunde*, VIII (1906), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> W. H. Jones and L. L. Kropf, *The Folk-Tales of the Magyars*, London, 1889, p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> K. Krumbacher, *Geschichte der byzantinischen Literatur*, München, 1897, p. 826.

<sup>21</sup> G. Schlumberger, *L'Épopée byzantine à la fin du dixième siècle*, Paris, 1896, I, 399.

<sup>22</sup> George Borrow, *Wild Wales*, London, 1907, p. 575.

<sup>22a</sup> Cf. E. J. Rapson, *The Cambridge History of India*, I (1922), Index, s. v.

<sup>23</sup> Thus a modern Indian version (*North Indian Notes and Queries*, 1893, p. 139, no. 291) ascribes the adventure to king Akbar.

to this question will remove the last doubt as to real origin of the Aḥikar romance.

In the Semitic branch of the tale the king is invariably a Near Eastern monarch, frequently identified with the mighty Sennacherib (705-681 B. C.). But in the plot of the romance the king is little more than a figure-head, the prime mover of the action being, in the first part of the story, the treacherous Nadan, in the second part, the foreign monarch who sends the riddle questions. The name of Aḥikar's nephew, *Nadan*, which is good Semitic, to all appearances suggested the Indian *Nanda*, owing to a superficial similarity in form. As a result, when the action of the romance was simplified, as pointed out above, the name of the king was dropped and replaced by that of the intriguer, who was then easily identified with the Indian king Nanda of legendary fame. On the other hand, the reverse process (the possibility of which might be theoretically admitted) is rendered impossible by the fact that Nadan's rôle in the Semitic *Aḥikar* is much older than the historical reign of the Indian Nanda. Furthermore, while the transfer of the name from the traitor and former prime mover to the new prime mover, who is the king himself, is easy to understand, one fails to see why the name of an Indian king should have been given, though in a Semitized form, to the traitor, whose rôle would have to be supposed, according to the Indianist hypothesis, to have been cut out of whole cloth.

Assuming then, as we safely may, that the Aḥikar story was carried from Mesopotamia to India, we face the further question as to the route by which it is likely to have travelled and along which it should perhaps have left some traces. Now it is certainly strange that none of the many Orientalists who have dealt with the Aḥikar romance appears to have been aware of its existence in Mediaeval Persia.

In his account of the reign of King Kosrau Anushirwan (A. D. 531-579) Firdousi tells the following episode:<sup>24</sup>

King Kosrau, exhausted with fatigue on a hunting expedition, falls asleep, his head resting on the chest of his loyal chancellor, the wise Buzurdjmihr, when a bird

descends from the sky, tears the monarch's bracelet, swallows one by one the precious stones of which it is composed, and then disappears. Buzurdjmihr is seized with terror, interpreting, rightly, the event as a most evil omen. Meanwhile the king wakes up, misses his bracelet, and suspects his chancellor of having stolen it and of having swallowed the pearls. Unable to defend himself, Buzurdjmihr is condemned to remain a prisoner in his own house.

Meanwhile his sister's son continues in the king's service and receives wise instructions from his uncle on how to grow in favor with his royal master. Kosrau, noticing this, one day asks him who has given him such wise counsel and is referred to Buzurdjmihr. Kosrau then sends the youth to the fallen minister's house to enquire how he of all men could have incurred such a disgrace. Buzurdjmihr simply replies that he considers his own diminished estate as better than that of the king. On hearing this reply, Kosrau is seized with anger and orders Buzurdjmihr to be thrown into a dungeon. Some time later he again sends the youth to find out how the prisoner bears his fate. He receives the reply that the fallen chancellor passes his days more happily than the king passes his. Kosrau then has him locked up in an iron cage provided with spikes, in which the unfortunate man cannot hope for rest either by day or by night. Again the monarch sends the young man to enquire into his uncle's state of mind, and again he receives the old reply: Buzurdjmihr's days are happier than those of Kosrau. Exasperated, the monarch sends the same messenger, this time accompanied by the executioner, to the prisoner, with orders either to extract a more satisfactory answer or to threaten him with the extreme penalty. Buzurdjmihr gives an answer to this effect: Death is the only truly egalitarian institution; but it is easier to take leave of a life of misery than of one spent, like the king's, in ease and luxury. On hearing this reply, Kosrau feels remorse; he orders his captive to be released from the cage, though he still keeps him a prisoner and does not think of reinstating him.

At this juncture the emperor of Rum sends Kosrau a locked casket with a letter requesting that he guess the contents without touching the lock. If he guesses right, the emperor will continue to pay him tribute and offer him presents; if not, he will cease to be Kosrau's tributary. All the mobeds of Persia are unable and helpless to solve the riddle, and the king at last realizes that only Buzurdjmihr can help him out of his perplexity. Accordingly he reinstates him to his post of chancellor. Buzurdjmihr has no trouble in guessing the contents of the casket from the condition of the first three persons he meets on leaving his prison.

Much the same story is told, in abridged form, by the Persian chronicler Al-Tha'libi, who wrote toward the beginning of the eleventh century of the Christian era and whose text, in French translation, reads as follows:<sup>25</sup>

Lorsque Anoûscharwân, courroucé contre Bouzourd-

<sup>24</sup> *Le Livre des Rois*, trad. J. Mohl, Paris, 1876-78, VI, 366 ff.

<sup>25</sup> *Histoire des Rois des Perses*, texte arabe publié et traduit par H. Zotenberg, Paris, 1900, pp. 366 ff.

jmihr, lui retira sa faveur, il lui ordonna de choisir pour demeure un endroit qu'il ne désirerait pas quitter, ni en hiver, ni en été; pour nourriture, un seul aliment auquel il ne substituerait aucun autre et, pour se couvrir un vêtement qu'il ne changerait jamais. Bouzourdjmihr choisit pour demeure le souterrain, parce qu'il est froid en été et chaud en hiver; pour se nourrir, le lait, parce qu'il est en même temps une nourriture substantielle et une boisson et l'aliment de l'enfant et du vieillard; et il prit pour vêtement la fourrure, qu'il endossait en hiver et qu'il portait à l'envers pendant l'été. Son martyre durait longtemps, de telle sorte qu'il perdit la vue.

L'empereur envoya à Anouscharwân un petit coffre fermé par un cadenas et scellé, avec ce message: Si tu dis à mon envoyé ce qu'il y a dans ce coffre, je m'engage à te payer tribut, sinon, non. Anouscharwân le demanda aux hommes perspicaces de sa cour, mais ils furent tous également hors d'état de répondre et de deviner. Il reconnut que seul Bouzourdjmihr, bien qu'il fût aveugle, était capable de résoudre le problème. Il donna l'ordre de le mettre en liberté, de le conduire au bain, de le revêtir du costume des vizirs qu'il portait auparavant et de l'introduire. Son ordre fut exécuté et Bouzourdjmihr fut amené. Il le reçut avec honneur, se justifia auprès de lui, lui parla du coffre et lui demanda ce qu'il contenait. Bouzourdjmihr lui demanda pour répondre à la question le délai d'une nuit. Le lendemain, il monta à cheval et se fit précéder par deux valets auxquels il ordonna de lui signaler la première personne qui viendrait en sens opposé sur son chemin. Une femme vint à passer et il lui demanda si elle était vierge ou épouse. Elle répondit qu'elle était vierge. Bouzourdjmihr poursuivit sa route. Une autre femme venant à passer, il lui demanda si elle était célibataire ou mariée.—Mariée, répondit-elle.—As-tu des enfants?—Non. Bouzourdjmihr s'éloigna. Une troisième femme qui vint à passer répondit à ses questions qu'elle avait des enfants. Il continua son chemin et, étant entré au palais, il se présenta devant Anouscharwân. Il lui demanda de donner l'ordre de faire venir l'envoyé et d'apporter le coffre scellé. Ce qui fut fait. Alors Bouzourdjmihr dit: Il y a dans ce coffre trois perles dont l'une n'est pas percée; une autre est percée à moitié et la troisième est percée entièrement. Le coffre ayant été ouvert, on trouva les perles, comme il avait dit. Anouscharwân admira sa perspicacité, se repentit de lui avoir fait éprouver son courroux et attribua ce fait au décret et à la volonté de Dieu. L'envoyé de l'empereur s'engagea, au nom de son maître, à payer tribut.

In this Persian story we have essentially the same facts as in the Indian narrative which was the starting point of this study: the wise minister thrown into prison for no particular reason, the

challenge of his royal master by a foreign king, who submits a difficult problem, the recall of the fallen chancellor and his reinstatement in his former honors. The attribution of the Persian tale to Kosrau I makes it probable that it dates from the time of the last Sassanid kings; it is at all events anterior to the conquest of Persia by the Arabs (A. D. 641).

Inasmuch as the reign of Kosrau I marks the introduction of much Indian material into Persia—it was in his reign, it will be recalled, that the *Pancatantra* was first translated into Pehlevi—the Persian story might be thought an offshoot of the Indian. Fortunately, Firdousi's text leaves no uncertainty about the important fact that the Persian tale (or rather its Pehlevi original) is an intermediary version standing between the Semitic Ahikar romance and the Indian story of King Nanda and his vezir Śakaṭāla.

The latter, as we pointed out above, makes no mention whatever of the vezir's nephew. In the Persian text of Firdousi, as in the Ahikar romance, this nephew (1) is the wise minister's sister's son, (2) receives instructions from his uncle, and (3) continues in the king's good graces after the downfall of his uncle. Only his treason has been suppressed. We may then conclude that the disappearance of the hero's nephew from the tale went on by degrees as the narrative migrated eastward. The treason theme was the first to go, while the young man retained his other functions in the lost Pehlevi text which was Firdousi's direct or indirect source; only in the abridged account of Al-Tha'ālibi and in the Indian story did the nephew disappear altogether. As for the motivation of the minister's disgrace, royal caprice was deemed sufficient to account for it. But the lost Pehlevi version, which we must suppose behind Firdousi's text, gives the final blow, it would seem, to Benfey's venturesome Indianist hypothesis as applied to the Ahikar romance.